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Living at a Value Systems Crossroads

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Tom Kilroy is a well-known figure in Irish letters as a result of the many plays he has written and directed, his short stint as an academic in NUI Galway during the 1980s, his membership of Aosdána, and the numerous literary awards he has won.

With the passing of such notables as John McGahern,Seamus Heaney and Dermot Healy in recent times, Kilroy's presence among us is all the more precious.

I often wonder to whom we will turn to provide an insider's view of the Ireland of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when the likes of John Montague, Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Tom Kilroy are no longer with us.

In a book of essays about the Ireland of the 1950s, *Beautiful Strangers*, published in the *Reimagining Ireland* series, Kilroy revealed the extent to which there was a genuine "confrontation of value systems", as people were presented with the "choice between retaining past values or striking out into the future".

I think these two features of 1950s Ireland offer a good point of departure for the discussion of Kilroy's only novel, *The Big Chapel*, first published in 1971 amid much controversy and subsequently shortlisted for the Booker prize.

Based on historical events that took place in Kilroy's native town of Callan in Co Kilkenny during the years 1867-1876, the story revolves around the largely self-imposed travails of the parish priest, Fr William Edward Lannigan (the fictional name given to the real-life figure Rev Robert O'Keeffe) when he chooses to ignore the instructions of his bishop, cardinal, and the Pope himself.

There is a real sense in which we can notice a genuine "confrontation of value systems" here, with Fr Lannigan firmly of the view that he is within his rights to favour the national schools, set up under the Commissioners of National Education in Dublin, over the Christian Brothers' school recently established in his parish.

To the suggestion that "The national schools is [sic] godless schools", the priest replies: "You forget that your own priest is manager of the schools. What have you to say to that? Do you think that I would countenance godless schools, as you put it?"

Many of Lannigan's problems stem from the fact that he is perceived to be "a follower of false education" and, what is worse, someone who openly consorts with Protestants. As the conflict continues to fester, the parish is divided into two bitterly opposed factions, with violence erupting with alarming regularity.

Enlisting Master Scully as headmaster of the national schools results in their being able to offer a broader curriculum and so attract more students (including some Protestants), a development that only serves to incite further hostility towards Fr Lannigan among his superiors.

The turmoil spreads to the Scully family, with the two sons Marcus and Nicolas continuing to side with the priest after their father has resigned as headmaster.

Nicholas, a disillusioned former Maynooth seminarian, is not afraid of publicly expressing contentious views about the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland: "They are creating a clerical dictatorship in this country, an outpost of the new Roman Empire. They would set up the bishop and his Pope as the true ruler of the land. That's what our clergy are coming to."

Fr Lannigan has his clerical functions removed by his bishop and initiates long drawn-out and financially disastrous legal proceedings against his superiors. His lawyers' obvious contempt for the Catholic Church's strange notion of what constitutes a judicial inquiry causes the priest to declare to Nicholas: "We've allied ourselves to unbelief."

He is clearly not comfortable with this position and is eventually forced to give up the cause and leave the parish, but not before sowing seeds of endless,and ultimately futile, strife.

Speaking to the local intellectual Mr Butler, Nicholas claims that Fr Lannigan is a man, not a religion, and that if he had to choose a cause, it would be one "that recognised men as they are," rather than one that looked to the day "when the nature of man would be, in some miraculous way, changed."

What *The Big Chapel* illustrates in a compelling way is that human nature does not change and that disputes surrounding religion have a habit of ending badly.

Eamon Maher is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght. His latest book, co-edited with Eugene O'Brien, is *From Prosperity to Austerity: A socio-cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and its Aftermath* (Manchester University Press).